

# Economic loss stands at over \$3.5 billion in six days of BNP's blockade: Joy

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**Online Desk:** Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ICT Affairs Adviser Sajeeb Wazed Joy has said the country's estimated loss to the economy stands at over US\$ 3.5 billion from the six days alone between October 28 and November 6 as BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and their allies observed a total of six days of blockades and strikes.

"The hardest hit are small traders, day labourers, and SMEs. The supply chain is in shambles, hurting both importers and exporters at an already critical economic period. Educational activities of children and youth are being drastically disrupted," he wrote in a facebook post from his verified account.

Sharing an article's web link published on Bangladeshi English language blog on politics "bdanalytica", Joy wrote that at least 110 incidents of arson had been reported, targeting mainly buses and trucks.

BNP and their allies are paying their goons Tk 3,000 for each attack. Transport sector woes are exacerbating the costs of living crisis, as fares have skyrocketed due to the increased risks.

The article written by Farhan Hossain is given blow as verbatim.

## The Costs of BNP-Jamaat's Successive Strikes and Blockades

Hartal (strike) and Oborodh (blockade) are not new to Indian sub-continental politics. Bangladesh too, is no stranger to such restrictive political programmes.

In fact, such programmes played a key role in the nation's long struggle for independence from Pakistan, in the decade long movement for restoration of democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s for various political causes including the holding of free and fair elections under political governments. Watching vandalism of public transportation, releasing the air from the tyres of rickshaw vans, clashes between protestors and law enforcement agents (LEAs), exploding of Molotov Cocktails (crude low-intensity hand-made explosives), and firing of tear-shells by LEAs were commonplace for those of us who grew up in Dhaka in the 90s and 2000s.

## The Fall from Grace

Yet, even for my generation, let alone the younger ones, political programmes like Hartal and Oborodh have become bywords for destructive activities which bring people's lives to a grinding halt. This change of mentality happened principally during the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. These years represented a particularly violent era of politics which was unprecedented even for Bangladesh. As stated before, although vandalism and/or clashes were not uncommon during strikes and blockades, a new low was reached in 2013 when Jamaat-E-Islami ("Jamaat") launched a series of violent protests signified by widespread and indiscriminate firebombing of civilians, LEAs, and all forms of transportation (including railways and river ferries/launches).

A total of 15 police members were killed in 2013 by Jamaat-Shibir backed by BNP during their violence to stop and oppose the war crimes trials, which is the domestic tribunal set up by Bangladesh to try war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity committed during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In 419 major incidents of political violence throughout the year of 2013, spearheaded by Jamaat-Shibir, 492 people were killed while 2,200 others were injured in the incidents. This was followed immediately by the violent blockades and sieges by BNP-Jamaat and their allies to resist the 10th parliamentary elections. The

movement primarily involved a firebombing campaign on civilians using public and private transport. They vandalised and torched hundreds of vehicles. As many as 200 people, including 20 law enforcers, were killed by their petrol bombs, handmade bombs and other sorts of violence.

An atmosphere of siege prevailed. BNP-Jamaat activists felled thousands of roadside trees to obstruct highways. They torched small shops, government and private establishments, and even power plants. BNP-Jamaat vandalised mosques, temples, pagodas and churches, and torched hundreds of copies of the holy Quran. On the day of the election, they killed 26 people, including a presiding officer and torched 582 schools across the country that were serving as voting centres. Braving all obstacles, people exercised their voting rights and helped continue the democratic process.

From 4 January 2015 onward, marking a year from the 10th parliamentary elections, BNP-Jamaat unleashed another reign of terror. This episode was even more deadly than the 2014 one. This time around, BNP-Jamaat activists' activities resulted in the deaths of 231 people (mostly through arson and petrol bomb attacks) and injured (mostly through burning) 1,180 others. Arson attacks were conducted to burn 2,903 cars, 18 rail carriages and 8 passenger water vessels. Through targeted attacks, 70 government offices were vandalised and/or destroyed and 6 land offices were burnt.

#### Making a Comeback

The episodes of extreme violence completely turned people away from BNP-Jamaat, including their long-term supporters. What followed was eight years of peace and stability in Bangladesh resulting in unprecedented economic and social development. But after more than eight years of hiatus, the dreaded cycle of Hartal and Oborodh, and their accompanying violence, made a comeback following the October 28, 2023 Grand Rally of the BNP. BNP and their allies first announced a day of hartal on October 29, followed by three days of Oborodh from October 31-November 2. This was followed by another two days of Oborodh by BNP, Jamaat, and allies on November 5 and 6. BNP and Jamaat have now announced further two days of Oborodh on November 8 and 9, with more such Hartal and Oborodh likely in the near future.

#### Aggregate Economic Loss

According to Bangladesh's premier business association, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI), each day of Hartal or Oborodh costs the economy Tk 6,500 Crore (or USD 588 million+). This means that the one day of Hartal and five days of Oborodh observed by BNP and its allies so far have cost the Bangladesh economy TK 39,000 Crore (or USD 3.5 billion). A further TK 13,000 Crore (or USD 1.17 billion) needs to be added for the two-days of Oborodh announced for 7 and 8 November, 2023 by BNP and its allies. Given the global economic situation following the back-to-back crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia War, and also the likely impact from the ongoing middle-east unrest, an emerging economy like Bangladesh cannot afford such destructive political programmes. The FBCCI too, on behalf of small, medium and large businesses of Bangladesh, called upon all political parties to refrain from programmes like Hartal and Oborodh, considering the disproportionate impact on the economy, especially in the current global and domestic economic situations.

#### Lives Being Disrupted

Strikes and blockades disproportionately impact on transportation like buses and trucks as they are prime targets for vandalism and arson attacks. Apart from the hassle being faced by people going about their daily lives in not finding sufficient transport options on the streets, there are even bigger impacts, for instance, rise in transport fares due to increased risks. Bangladeshis, especially the lower and middle income classes are currently reeling from a costs of living crisis, owing to global and domestic economic challenges.

This has been exacerbated by the ongoing strikes and blockades which has resulted in skyrocketing transport fares ultimately resulting in further increase in the prices of essentials. The entire supply chain is being disrupted, as importers can't get goods into the hinterland from the ports, while exporters are finding it difficult to deliver their goods etc from their production facilities to the air and sea ports for sending abroad. From large shopping malls to wholesale traders, all have seen business going down sharply due to the BNP-Jamaat blockades. Sales have fallen by 70-80%.

## Uncertainty Grips Students

The continuous blockades enforced by BNP and like-minded political parties have cast a shadow over academic activities in Dhaka and other parts of the country. While many schools and colleges have remained open despite the blockades, students' attendance has dropped remarkably. Many guardians are reluctant to send their children to schools and colleges due to the risk of falling victims to political violence by blockade enforcers, especially those who live far from the educational institutions. Additionally, educational institutions have been forced to postpone scheduled exams, compounding the stress and uncertainty over students' studies. This comes after almost two years of academic disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the damages from which are yet to be fully recovered by the educational institutions.

### Indiscriminate Violence Persists

Despite the Supreme Court of Bangladesh making it clear in the case of *Khondaker Modarresh Elahi vs. the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (2007)* that violent enforcement of Hartal/Oborodh etc are completely against the law, BNP and its allies have once again resorted to arson attacks as a principal means of enforcing their ongoing strikes and blockades. Between October 28 and November 6, a total of 110 arson attacks have been recorded by the media and the Department of Fire Service and Civil Defence. Of these, 29 incidents were reported on October 28, 19 on October 29, one on October 30, 11 on October 31, 14 on November 1, seven on November 2, six on November 4, 13 on November 5, and 10 on November 6. Information from arrested BNP-Jamaat activists have revealed that they are running the arson duties almost like an organised crime outfit, with each such attack carrying a TK 3,000 reward from the party, with allowances being doubled during the second phase of the blockades. Their prime targets are buses and goods-laden trucks.